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Chapter

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## 1 Two festivals of reunion

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I'll begin my discussion of the separation constraint in China and Taiwan by relating what happens at an 'obviously' important moment: namely midnight on new year's eve. For although the Chinese lunar calendar (*yueli, nongli*) has no shortage of significant and celebrated occasions, by far the most elaborate and extended celebrations are prompted by the 'turning of the year' (*guonian*) – i.e. the passage into the next annual cycle. And as I'll show in this chapter, the new year festival, with its solemn rituals and raucous banqueting, explicitly and repeatedly celebrates the ideals of 'unity' and 'reunion'. It elaborates, on some levels, a fantasy of perpetual 'non-separation', and its key moment entails reunification with the dead. This is also true of the important festival marking the arrival of 'mid-autumn' (*zhongqiu*), which I will also discuss. But I should stress that the emphasis of these two festivals on reunion is far from unique. For as Göran Aijmer has pointed out, the *entire* Chinese ceremonial calendar is built around reciprocal visits, especially those between ancestors and descendants (Aijmer 1991). Such visits – marked off by rituals of arrival and departure – inevitably highlight ongoing reciprocity and 'unity' in the face of death and spatial separation.<sup>1</sup>

Calendrical festivals are thus my first, perhaps rather obvious and public, evidence that processes of separation and reunion are a matter of concern in China. In this chapter, I will describe at some length new year celebrations in the rural northeast (primarily as seen from the household of one local cadre in the village of Dragon-head), and also in the Taiwanese community of Angang. In both places the new year *compels*, or at least appears to compel, reunions of many kinds. Then I will turn, albeit more briefly, to the mid-autumn festival as celebrated, also in northeastern China, at a teacher's training college (*shizhuan*). The students of this college – village-born migrants through an educational system which has often been strongly anti-traditional – do *not* go home for the 'mid-autumn' celebrations, and instead are compelled to reunite in new configurations. This is of interest, because when people in China and Taiwan discuss the new year and mid-autumn festivals, they often say the traditions associated

with them are ‘unchangeable’ (*gaibuliao*). But the fact is that they are very changeable indeed, and the reunions which are meant to accompany them are far from inevitable. In other words, and to put the conclusion of this chapter simply: reunions may be highly desirable in China, but history has a way of interfering with them.

### The turning of the year

First, the new year. There are, of course, highly coherent cosmological and theological explanations for what transpires during the lunar new year festival. According to official (imperial) logic, its rituals are meant to reaffirm a uniquely Chinese cosmic hierarchy. Stephan Feuchtwang has convincingly argued, however, that this orthodox view – while in some respects still widely-held – has long been subject to popular reinterpretation: ‘Under the sweet talk of a benign imperial cosmos’, he suggests, ‘is another demonic cosmos of great destructive powers and the capacity to withhold or command them’ (Feuchtwang 1992: 55). From the perspective of this popular heterodoxy, what is celebrated on new year’s day is not ‘cosmic order’, as such, but rather the remarkable survival by families and communities of an ‘annual apocalypse’ in which everyone might just as well have been killed (Feuchtwang 1992: 25–60).

Simultaneously, and perhaps at a more obvious level, the entire festival – during which one ‘welcomes the year’ (*yingnian*), or ‘welcomes the spring’ (*yingchun*) – is a powerful manifestation of something else. For as Feuchtwang notes, each new year implies, by definition, a highly desired familial reunion or ‘completion’ (which survival of the annual apocalypse makes possible):

The eve is a return home and a completion of the family household. At the very least a member of a Chinese family would feel absence from it. Many would regret their absence poignantly. Most would be home, celebrating the continuing narrative of a complete household, renewed by their homecoming. (1992: 25)

As I’ve already suggested in the introduction, such ‘household narratives’, along with the narratives of friendship and community, are based in China on the premise that human and spiritual relationships are always in spatial flux, and that separation is therefore inevitable. But at this crucial calendrical juncture, one encounters a fleeting solution to the separation constraint: a suspended moment during which work is halted, divisions and death overcome, the pace of visits intensified, and meals and games prolonged as if people could produce, through sheer collective will, a state of permanent, celebratory reunion.

This, I want to suggest, is what most people find most interesting and important about the festival. In speaking to friends and acquaintances in

mainland China about the new year celebrations I found – to my surprise – that they tended to stress, endlessly, what takes place in the period *following* the first day of the first lunar month, and what in many cases takes place completely *after* the official three-day holiday period has come to an end. That is, instead of stressing the activities which, at least from my perspective, form the true cosmological, theological, and moral ‘core’ of the new year, and about which they said little in spite of my prompting, they stressed the subsequent period. This is the time when relatives and friends come together for reunion visits and meals in the process known as *bainian*, ‘giving new year’s greetings’, or *chuanmenr*, literally ‘stringing together doors’, a process which only ends with the ‘lantern festival’ (*yuanxiaojie*) on the fifteenth day of the first month.<sup>2</sup> While these get-togethers are not explicitly ‘ritualised’, and are not obviously ‘religious’, they do certainly follow predictable patterns, and during them people have very clear ideas about how one is meant to behave.

But what I want to stress here is neither the ritual-like nature of these gatherings, nor the indifference of people to the ‘proper’ new year celebrations which precede them, but rather the striking *continuity* of post-new year reunion activities with the obviously ‘ritualised’ events which take place earlier in the festival – a continuity which is explicable in terms of the Chinese concern with separation and reunion. Let me explain. At the simplest level, two fundamental things can be said to happen during *guonian*, the ‘turning of the year’. First, a complicated series of rituals are held for the purpose of dealing with the seasonal movements of spirits, namely: (1) the ‘sending-off’ of gods; (2) the ‘greeting’ of ancestors; (3) the ‘sending-off’ of ancestors; and (4) the ‘greeting’ of gods. These rites, and especially those involving the ancestors, frame the central days of the festival. Second, at the exact moment of the turning of the year – precisely in conjunction with the ancestral ‘greeting’ – and then for many days following, a series of reunions (usually ‘reunion meals’) are held between various categories of (living) persons. These involve, first of all, immediate patrilineal and affinal kin, but then also extend outwards to encompass, in most cases, large (extended) networks of relatives, neighbours, friends, and colleagues. In short, at this time of year almost all Chinese beings (living and dead) *move*, and at particular moments these moving beings *reunite* in different – and differently celebrated – configurations, before dispersing yet again.

### Old Yang’s new year

In this section, I’ll provide a narrative sketch of part of the festival from the perspective of one family in Dragon-head, so that readers will get at least a

general sense of the flow of the festival, and of what takes place in one Chinese community at this important time of year. In Dragon-head, the celebration of the new year (officially known as *chunjie*, the Spring Festival), falls during the dead of winter when it is bitterly cold. The apple and pear orchards which surround the community, and the fields where maize will be planted several months later, are still silent, barren and icy. For those who rely on agriculture, i.e. for almost everyone in Dragon-head, not much work can happen at this time of year. But the external quietness and frozenness of the surrounding countryside belie a great deal of activity and expenditure, as villagers prepare for the ‘turning of the year’, and make efforts to ensure that its celebration, whatever the weather, will be ‘hot and noisy’ (*renao*), i.e. boisterous and intense.

Here, on the late afternoon of *chuxi*, the final day of the final lunar month, i.e. on new year’s eve, I sat in the home of Old Yang, a successful farmer and a village-level cadre (*ganbu*), keeping myself comfortably warm on his *kang* (fire-heated platform bed), while half-watching one of his infant grandsons, also on the *kang*, demolish a cigarette-carton. Old Yang himself was out in the cold gathering fire-wood, great quantities of which would be needed for the stove in the coming days, while his wife was in the kitchen, preparing various special foods for the festival, including sweet *baozi* (steamed rice-filled buns), the favourite of her youngest son. Earlier in the day I had watched Yang decorate his home in standard (if somewhat modest) fashion for the new year. A red lantern had been installed on a pole in front of the house, and *duilian*, auspicious poetic couplets, had been hung in matching pairs around various doors and gates (even around the gates to the enclosures for pigs). Over the main doorway, Yang posted a red paper banner which proclaimed in gold letters: ‘The Family United in Joy!’ (*quan jia huan le*). The doorway below was framed by a matching couplet:

Prosperity increasing on all fronts,  
abundance year after year!  
Every blessing achieved to the full,  
glorious step after step!<sup>3</sup>

A similar verse was posted by his sons on the main outside gate (*waimenr*) of the family’s compound, later supplemented with a string of brightly coloured electric lights.

In spite of these conventional preparations, Old Yang more than once told me, apologetically, that he and his family were mostly ‘indifferent’ (*wusuowei*) to the question of the new year and its traditions (*chuantong*). By this he seemed primarily to mean the various folk-beliefs (of which there are a great many) about what should and should not be done, or said,

or eaten, etc., during the new year festival, and ideas concerning the worship of ancestors and deities. These, he said, were ‘superstitions’ or ‘misguided beliefs’ (*mixin*), and things of the past – although of course, as he noted, many local families still observed them. I was repeatedly told, by Yang and others, that many ‘customary practices’ (*fengsu xiguan*) had ‘gone cold’ (*leng*) since 1949, and particularly during and after the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (*wenhua da geming*). But I was also repeatedly told, and in some cases by the very same people, that Chinese traditions had proved themselves ‘unchangeable’ (*gaibuliao*), and ‘unprohibitible’ (*jinzhibuliao*) – in spite of considerable efforts to change and prohibit them – and that the celebration of the new year festival had therefore ‘not changed in the least’ (*shenme gaibian dou meiyou*). Be that as it may, cadres such as Yang, along with many non-cadres (and even in the post-Mao era with its apparent tolerance of tradition and of popular religion), generally avoid statements and actions which might be construed as products of ‘feudal thinking’ (*fengjian sixiang*). In this and other ways, Yang struck me, in the entrepreneurial mood of early-1990s China, as a rather old-fashioned cadre, with very clear and genuinely-held ideas about ‘serving the people’, and serious misgivings about displays of frivolity, wasteful consumption, or feudal thinking. So in spite of his preparations, and the mood of cheerful anticipation among his wife and children, I was expecting the festival, in Yang’s home at least, to be a low-key, and perhaps even austere anti-traditional, affair.

Then, as I sat on his *kang* at sunset on new year’s eve, Old Yang’s youngest son (an unmarried nineteen-year-old who lived with his parents, and who, as the youngest son, would continue to do so after marriage) came in and asked if I wanted to join him in ‘shooting off firecrackers’. This invitation was so off-hand that I very nearly declined in favour of playing with the grandchildren in the warm house. But I did decide to go, and as we left the farmhouse we were joined at the outside gate of the compound, in what obviously was an organised affair, by Yang’s eldest son, and by several male cousins (the sons of Yang’s brothers). Old Yang himself was nowhere in sight. In the gathering darkness, our small group walked, in silence, the short distance up a frozen hill directly behind the farmhouse to a clump of trees, where we stopped.

We were standing in front of three graves. These simple burial mounds – so inconspicuous among the trees that I had not even noticed them before that moment – were rounded piles of dirt, covered with branches, and fronted by a small brick archway or gate (*men*). Things then proceeded quickly and without much fuss. First, one of the young men tied a long string of firecrackers to a nearby tree, lit the string, and stood back. The

blasts echoed around the surrounding hills. At the same time, another young man knelt to place a small pile of unmarked yellowish-gold paper in front of each of the three graves, adjacent to the openings of the small gates. They called this 'earth paper', *tuzhi*, and later confirmed that it 'represents money' (*daibiao qian*) which can be used by spirits to buy necessities and bribe officials in the other world. The three stacks of 'earth paper' were then burnt. One stack, however, did not burn very completely, in spite of several attempts to ignite it. The men *looked* at each other as if to say (or so I thought) that this might be a bad omen. But one of them *said*: 'it's nothing' (*meiyou shi*). (Note that for the entire period of the festival it is considered unlucky to say unlucky things.) The young men then formed a group in front of the mounds, knelt down, and bowed (*ketou*), foreheads to the ground, three times in unison. The whole procedure took only a few minutes: setting off firecrackers, burning 'earth paper', bowing three times. Then Yang's sons and I walked back down the hill to their father's farmhouse, while their cousins set off through an adjacent field, on their way to make offerings in front of other graves.

Back at Old Yang's, the two brothers exploded more strings of firecrackers, after which we went inside and warmed our hands on the *kang*. Now it was dark outside. In our absence someone had placed a colourful 'God of Wealth' (*caishen*) poster on the wall, which for the moment was being ignored. Old Yang had meanwhile returned from his wood-gathering expedition, and his daughter and son-in-law (who lived nearby in Dragon-head) had also arrived at the farmhouse for the celebrations. Soon after our return all of the adult men (i.e. Yang, his two sons, his son-in-law, and I) sat down to eat a meal which centred on dumplings (*jiaozi*). We were then shortly joined at the table by Yang's wife, his daughter, his daughter-in-law, and two infant grandsons. Small coins had been hidden in two of the dumplings, and I was told that those who found the lucky dumplings would have 'blessings' in the coming year (*shei chi shei fu*).

When the food from this brief and relatively modest new year's eve meal had been cleared away, the family immediately sat together on the *kang* and started playing cards, gambling for small change. Virtually the entire evening was taken up with this card-game, which lasted for about five hours, almost until midnight, and it was the occasion for much affectionate joking and teasing. At one point (and, as far as I could tell, completely spontaneously), the infant grandsons were waved up and down in front of their grandmother, Yang's wife, in the semblance of a respectful bow. In return for this, and as everyone laughed, Mrs Yang gave money to the infants, twenty *kuai* each (pocketed for safe-keeping by their mothers). Later, the poster of the God of Wealth came unstuck from the wall, fell, and landed on Old Yang's youngest son, literally sticking to his shoulder. At



first he seemed startled, then he broke into a broad grin and shouted with delight: 'Now that means something good!' (*hao de yisi!*).

As it neared midnight – and the start of a new year – the game drew to a close. The sons went outside and set off more long strings of firecrackers in front of the house, something which was simultaneously being done at neighbouring farmhouses throughout the countryside. Mrs Yang stood at the door, holding one of her rather terrified-looking grandsons, admiring the noise, and commenting on the expense of it all. When this very impressive barrage had died down, everyone came back inside and a table was once more set up next to the *kang*. A relatively sombre midnight meal of dumplings was eaten, this time by the men only, and almost in silence. Yang's youngest son – the unmarried one – did not eat at all. Then, as the new year began, the two sons and the son-in-law hurried off into the darkness – but they were not allowed to leave before midnight. And I was not, on this occasion, invited to join them. I was later told that they were playing all-night *majiang*, the result of which – whether a 'win' (*ying*) or a 'loss' (*shu*) – would indicate the kind of luck they could expect for the coming year. After their departure, Yang, his wife, his daughter, and his grandson settled in to sleep on the main *kang*, while I stretched out on the warm *kang* in the room opposite.

It was (for everyone, I think) a bad night's sleep, one which started later than usual and was interrupted by periodic bursts of early-morning firecrackers which sent the dogs and chickens into a frenzy. At sunrise (i.e. the first sunrise of the lunar new year), the three young men noisily returned to the house from their all-night round of *majiang*. Almost immediately, they sat down at the table with Old Yang for another hasty meal: a breakfast of yet more *jiaozi* (dumplings). Mrs Yang proudly informed me that the omens were good: all three of 'her sons' (i.e. her two sons and her son-in-law) had won something during the night, even if not very much, only about twenty *kuai*. The important thing, as she stressed, was to win and not lose. Once the breakfast table had been cleared, the young men sprawled out on the *kang* and tried to sleep, for which they were roundly criticised by Yang's daughter. But before long guests began to arrive at the house, and everyone had to wake up. The first visit, a very brief one, was from Old Yang's sister's son-in-law, a man who lived only about one minute away in an adjacent farmhouse. He was accompanied by his young daughter, to whom Mrs Yang tried to give ten *kuai* as a new year's gift. At first the offer was politely refused, as is expected on these occasions, but when pressed the girl accepted the money before departing with her father. Soon afterwards, Yang's son-in-law left the house to return to his own parent's home, accompanied by his wife (Yang's daughter) and their son.

Then, at around ten o'clock, a large group of visitors arrived. These were Yang's closest patrilineal relatives, i.e. the families of the young men who had joined Yang's sons in making offerings at the nearby graves on the previous evening. Almost immediately, the men in this group set up a table on the floor and started playing cards, while the women started playing *majiang* next to them on the *kang*. While playing, they ate seeds and fruit, and the men smoked, always sharing cigarettes back and forth. The children meanwhile played outside, shooting off spare firecrackers. Most of the visitors arrived carrying bags and baskets of gifts – usually rice wine, cakes, and tinned foods, in lucky combinations of four or eight – which were left lying about the house, often without comment. During the course of the day, Mrs Yang emptied these out, again often without comment, and returned the bags and baskets to the owners. Old Yang himself had meanwhile quietly gone outside to work, gathering more firewood; when he later returned to the house he did not join in the games, but instead played with his grandson in the second *kang*-room. Occasionally a visitor would come and speak with him for a few moments. During all of this activity, Mrs Yang, assisted primarily by her daughter-in-law, was preparing large quantities of food in the kitchen; and eventually the games were stopped so that this could be set out on the tables. Married men (including Yang) sat in chairs at the main table on the floor, while women squatted around low tables placed on the *kangs*. Children either joined their mothers, or simply walked around with bowls in hand, grabbing the occasional piece of food. This meal was a noisy and familiar affair, and in the middle of it arrangements were made for meals to be held in coming days at *other* houses.

There was a kind of shambolic intensity to the whole first day of the new year at Yang's house. Many of the guests were slightly drunk, and complained that they had really eaten too much. The friendly and boisterous games of cards and *majiang* – which were started up again as soon as the food was cleared away – went on for many hours. Through it all, the children raced in and out of the house, and the whole noisy place was soon littered with seeds, fag-ends, wrappers, bottle-caps, and spent firecrackers. Eventually, late in the afternoon, and although everyone was encouraged *not* to leave, these relatives began to slip away, departing by foot or bicycle or motorcycle. In the afternoon and early evening of the first day of the first month, the north China countryside around Dragon-head was filled with those similarly, i.e. somewhat drunkenly, weaving their way towards home.

In the coming days, the same scenes were repeated many times at Old Yang's: the arrival of guests, the seemingly nonchalant gift-giving, the playing of card-games and *majiang*, the sharing of food and drink, negoti-

ations over future reunions (which were always either explicitly arranged or vaguely promised), and so on. I did eventually see how relatively protracted and ‘hot and noisy’ the celebrations at Yang’s home were, in part because I also spent time in another household where things passed much more quietly. This second family had fewer relatives in the immediate vicinity, and their celebrations of *kinship* were thus dispensed with fairly quickly. They also had considerably fewer non-kin visitors, I suspect largely because they lacked the local political or economic influence which, during this festival, is a kind of magnet. That is, many people in and around Dragon-head seemed to *want* to express their connection to Old Yang, who has power and prestige in the local community, by visiting him during the festival. But the members of this second family were nevertheless also very busy during the new year. As local people say, they were ‘busy playing’ (*mangzhewanr*), i.e. actively engaged in visiting relatives, neighbours and friends.

Old Yang’s family, meanwhile, and in spite of his comments about ‘superstition’, had surely observed almost all of the basic things which people say ‘should be done’ (*yinggai zuode*) during the festival, including the basic religious (ancestral) rites. In this respect, the Yang family’s new year strikes me as typical, and much of it will undoubtedly seem very familiar to readers already acquainted with the Chinese lunar new year festival. But what exactly makes it seem familiar? First, because their house was specifically decorated for the festival, with careful attention paid to doors, gates, and windows. Second, because they ‘gathered together’ (*tuanyuan*) as a family, and momentarily stayed together for a meal at a particular moment in time (i.e. at midnight on *chuxi*, the last evening of the last lunar month). Third, because prior to this gathering together they honoured their ancestors in the usual way (with firecrackers, offerings, and *ketou*). Fourth, because at the moment of ancestral return they ate particular foods, including dumplings (*jiaozi*), which ‘represent reunion’. Fifth, because they acknowledged, at least minimally, the movements of gods, who both come and go during the festival (the God of Wealth poster which appeared on their wall bore the legend ‘The God of Wealth Arrives!’). Sixth, because the hierarchy of generations was acknowledged (even if only jokingly) by the waving of grandsons in front of their grandmother, and by her gifts to them (and later to other children) of money. Seventh, because they went on to reunite (usually for meals) with virtually all of their significant relations during the subsequent period of ‘stringing together doors’, and exchanged new year gifts with them. Eighth, because the family – especially the sons – indulged in card-games and *majiang*, and more generally ‘played’ (*wanr*) during the festival rather than working (although note the hard work of Old Yang and his wife during the festival). And, finally, because they

observed some of the ‘good-luck’ codes of the festival: i.e. they avoided talking about bad or inauspicious things, and certain occurrences (e.g. the outcome of *majiang* games, the distribution of lucky dumplings) were read by them as omens of the year to come.

### Some key aspects of the festival

Having given a brief description of a portion of the lunar new year as seen from one home, I now want to discuss certain aspects of the festival more generally, drawing on material from other families in Dragon-head, and also from Angang in Taiwan (this latter material will be indented). In both places, the central moment of the festival is arguably the *reunion* with the ancestors which takes place on new year’s eve (*chuxi*), and which marks the ‘turning of the year’. But as I’ve already noted, the entire lengthy process of celebrating the new year may in fact be seen as an intricate and extended cycle of separations and reunions. As I’ve also pointed out, this cycle within the lunar calendar effectively never comes to a stop (again cf. Aijmer 1991). That is, families are always building up – in part via separations – to the culminating ancestral reunion on new year’s eve, which in turn sets in train a new sequence of partings and returns. But the festival period could be said to properly ‘begin’ with a separation which takes place on *xiaonian*, the ‘little new year’, which falls on the twenty-third or twenty-fourth day of the last lunar month. At around this time, people begin in earnest to make their final new year preparations.

#### 1 ‘Attending the new year market’ (gan nianji) and conventional preparations

In Dragon-head, the purchase of most *nianhuo* (‘new year goods’) is made in the nearest market-town (which is a brief bicycle ride away). In light of my argument, it may be of interest to note that these periodic rural markets are called *ji*, literally ‘to gather together’, and I would suggest that they do represent a remarkable moment of unity and ‘gathering together’ for the residents of the local marketing community. This is true of the ‘big markets’ (*daji*) held twice a week throughout the year, for which people arrive from villages scattered throughout the countryside. But it is especially true of the last market of the old year – called the ‘new year market’, *nianji* – which is an extraordinarily intense occasion. On this day many thousands of villagers descend on the market town to buy their new year goods, and on the occasion I attended it became literally impossible to move on the streets and alleyways because of the crush of human bodies. If nothing else, the *nianji* is a striking manifestation of the mass

preparations, following conventional patterns, for the new year celebration, and even possibly – by extension – a manifestation of the fact that this festival of reunion ‘unites China’. (This is not a trivial observation. The integration of local and regional systems in China via marketing centres – a notion associated with the important work of G William Skinner – has been widely discussed in the literature; for perspectives on this issue in relation to Taiwan, for example, see Crissman (1981) and Sangren (1985).)

If they have not already done so, many people attending the market will buy new clothes, especially for their children, because new clothes, it is said, should be worn by children at the beginning of a new year. Almost everyone will buy decorations for their homes, including matching couplets (*duilian*) which are often written on the spot for them by local calligraphers, and mass-produced posters celebrating ‘wealth’ and ‘fertility’. Almost everyone will buy food to be eaten by guests during the process of ‘stringing together doors’, because these guests, as everyone agrees, must be well-fed. Almost everyone will also buy gifts, including bottles of rice-wine and tinned fruits, which will be given away when they visit the homes of others, because gifts always circulate during the festival. And almost everyone will buy ‘earth paper’ and incense and firecrackers, so that the movements of the ancestors and gods may be properly acknowledged. (Note the direct or indirect relationship of many of these *nianhuo*, new year goods, to processes of separation and reunion.)

On returning to their homes from the market, people in Dragon-head continue with preparations. Houses, as I have mentioned, are at least modestly decorated, for instance with brightly coloured posters comprising single auspicious characters such as *fu* (‘blessings’). (*Fu* posters are often turned ‘upside down’, *dao*, because the characters *fu* and *dao* spoken together sound the same as ‘blessings arrive’.) Careful attention is given to doors, gates, and other openings, including the ‘outside gates’ (*waimen*) which lead into farmhouse compounds, the front doors of houses, inside bedroom and kitchen doors, windows, and even gates to animal enclosures. As at Old Yang’s home, virtually all the main doorways and gates in the village are framed with *duilian*, matching auspicious couplets written in dramatic language. Most of those displayed in Dragon-head were written in gold or black ink on red paper, and the flourishing style of the *duilian* calligraphy is felt to be as important as the poetic content itself – which almost always refers in some way to increased fertility, prosperity, and happiness.

Later, I’ll be discussing both doorways and poetry, but here I want briefly to make one observation on their significance in relation to separation and reunion. It seems plausible that these decorations might focus attention on the door or gate itself and on what passes through it *as part of*

*arriving and departing*. This most obviously includes relatives, guests, ancestors, and gods. But it also includes – and this is the explicit reason for the decorations – two further things. The first is good fortune, *haoyun*, (and more abstractly good ‘cosmic energies’, *qi*), which may ‘arrive’ through the front door or gate of a house, and which is said to be enticed by auspicious words of greeting. The second is *bad* fortune (often in the form of evil spirits) which may need to be kept away, or made to ‘depart’, at times through the use of charms and door gods which ‘prevent evil’ (*bixie*) from entering, but also through the deflecting power of auspicious *duilian* poetry and calligraphy.

For related reasons, houses are thoroughly cleaned and ‘swept out’ before the end of the year (*saodi*). This is done in order to rid the house of the old year’s dust (*jiunian de huichen*) and, by extension, of any lingering bad luck, which is literally pushed out of the front door. But note that during the festival period itself, by contrast, people generally do *not* sweep out rubbish, especially firecracker debris, which is said to represent wealth. On the contrary, this is swept *in* through the door, and kept in a corner until the festival is over, welcomed as an omen of prosperity. People sometimes also specifically go out of the house (usually on new year’s eve) in order to carry back in a bundle of wood; this is because the expression ‘carrying much firewood’ (*bao dachai*), is similar to the expression ‘carrying great wealth’ (*bao dacai*), something which is very welcome *inside* the home.

Another key activity in the build-up to the festival (and something frequently mentioned by informants in general discussions of the new year) is the slaughtering of animals, especially pigs, which will be consumed during the festival itself. In Dragon-head as elsewhere, ‘killing the new year pig’ (*sha nianzhu*) is taken as a clear signal that the old year is coming to an end. People explain that in the past it was often *only* possible to eat meat during this one festival, and so *sha nianzhu* had a special significance. People often comment on the ‘boisterousness’ of their family celebrations by saying that the meat from the new year pig has been ‘completely eaten up’ (*chiguang*) due to the flood of visitors. It should be noted that these animals – a key symbol of new year commensality – are generally the property of women, and are normally taken care of by them throughout the year in preparation for slaughtering at the end of it.<sup>4</sup>

In Angang, Taiwan, people similarly engage in intense marketing in preparation for the new year, although they are more likely to travel to the city in order to do so. They buy new clothes (especially for their children to wear). They buy great quantities of incense and spirit money for use in new year offerings to spirits, including the especially large spirit money which is offered only to Tiangong (the Emperor of

Heaven). They buy food, drink, and gifts for the process of *bainian*, and they purchase *duilian* poetry and posters with which to decorate their homes. These homes are duly decorated, and the old dirt is swept out of them in preparation for the arrival of a new year. (In Angang, as it happens, I found myself caught up in the rather arduous new year task of cleaning the walls surrounding spirit medium altars – arduous because these walls had been almost completely blackened by the accumulated incense smoke of the old year.) As in Dragon-head, during the festival itself rubbish is swept into rather than out of the home. Pigs and other animals are slaughtered in anticipation of the coming moments of reunion commensality. ‘Eating up’ (*chiguang*) such food, including the ‘new year pig’ (*nianzhu*), along with the food bought in new year markets (*nianji*), is an important sign – in Angang as in Dragon-head – of having had a good celebration.

## 2 *The ‘sending-off’ and ‘greeting’ of the Stove God, and other deities*

On the ‘little new year’, *xiaonian*, which as I’ve noted for many Chinese marks the proper beginning of the festive season, the Stove God (*zao wang ye*, or *zaoshen*) is ritually ‘sent off’ (*song zao*). According to legend, this deity observes, from his position at the family stove, the daily activities of his hosts. At the end of each year he then travels, along with his wife, to Heaven (Tian) in order to present an account of the host family’s behaviour (cf. Chard 1990, Feuchtwang 1992: 58–60, Bray 1997: 107–14). In spite of the usual modesty of his icons, this god is referred to as the ‘Master of the Entire Family’ (*yi jia zhi zhu*) in the calligraphy over most stoves in Dragon-head. A celebratory couplet is also often posted there: ‘Ascending to Heaven Convey Good News, Descending to Earth Protect the Peace’ (*shangtian yan haoshi, xiajie bao pingan*). It is said that the Stove God’s new year report will influence the fortunes of his host family in the coming year, and for this reason special offerings are made in his honour during his ‘sending-off’; firecrackers are exploded, and he is made offerings of food, incense, and spirit money. He is also offered a sweet ‘stove candy’ (*zaotang*), which is said to stick his lips or teeth together, thus making it more difficult for him to make an unflattering report (*buneng shuo huai hua*). This candy is eaten by people as well, so that they will be less likely to say inauspicious things, *bu jili de hua*, during the festival period.

Here I want to stress the significance which attaches specifically to the way in which the Stove God is sent off – and to note that this particular activity (*song zao*) effectively marks the beginning of the festive season. It is important for the household that this should be done properly, as a show of respect to the God in advance of his annual report to Heaven. The



connection between the respectful sending-off and the hoped-for result (a good report) is quite explicit. For this reason, as Chard has noted, the offerings made to the Stove God during the new year festival are much more elaborate than at any other time of the year (Chard 1990: 151). But one should reflect, as well, on the message of the sticky candy which is given to him. Here a departure offering literally produces a bind on the divine recipient, and devotees thus try to exert some control over events. Having departed from the home on the 'little new year', the Stove God does, of course, later return to resume his residence, at which point he will be 'greeted', *jie*, with offerings.

But in taking a new year 'journey' of this kind the Stove God is not exceptional and, on the contrary, divine movements are a central feature of the festival. (More generally, as I will later discuss, the movements of gods are central to Chinese popular religion, and are among the most common immediate justifications for the mounting of rituals.) In describing Old Yang's new year, I noted that a poster for the God of Wealth (*caishen*) made a sudden appearance in his home on new year's eve. This poster – a colourful tribute to prosperity complete with images of American dollars and Chinese *renminbi* – reads 'The God of Wealth Arrives!' (*caishendao*); and the explicitly stated hope is precisely that this God will now, at the 'turning of the year', 'arrive' or 'descend' (*dao*) to bless this household with prosperity in the coming months. For the Yang household, displaying this poster was a simple way of 'greeting the God of Wealth' (*jie caishen*) upon his arrival. Similar, and often much more elaborate, greetings of this deity are conducted across China.

In Angang (where worship of the Stove God is not taken very seriously, but where worship in general is taken very seriously indeed) many people engage in a much more complex and elaborate process of 'sending-off' deities in the days leading up to the end of the last lunar month. Here I was told that before the new year begins, *all* of the many Buddhist and Daoist spirits worshipped by local people (both in temples and at their own domestic altars) 'go to heaven' (*shangtian*) in order to 'hold a meeting' (*kaihui*) during which they report to the highest god, i.e. to the Emperor of Heaven, Tiangong, on the activities of the mortals below. Each one must be 'sent-off' (*song*). To cite one example: on 'the little new year' in Angang I attended a rather grand sending-off celebration at the home of a local woman who was a spirit medium. Her house was crowded with devotees who provided offerings 'freely given from the heart'. Each of the female deities for whom she spoke was given food and spirit money as a sending-off tribute, and their carved images were draped in newly-acquired imperial-style



robes prior to departure.<sup>5</sup> This divine exodus is said to explain two features of the new year period in Angang. First, because the gods are ‘gone’ (*buzai*), it is impossible for spirit mediums to become possessed, with the result that the normally lively spirit-possession business comes to a halt. Second, because the gods are not present during the festival, it is possible for locals (including spirit mediums) to indulge without fear in activities which might normally meet with divine disapproval – such as gambling and drinking. However, on one occasion in Angang I was told that some of the gods had unexpectedly returned on the day following the ‘little new year’, in order to see what mischief people might be getting up to in their absence!

### 3 *The ‘greeting’ and ‘sending off’ of the ancestors*

I’ve described the offerings made in front of the Yang family burial mounds in Dragon-head. These coincide with the emergence of the ancestors (*zugong*), who on new year’s eve are ‘invited to return’ to their homes (*qinghuilai*). In response to this invitation, they are said to temporarily emerge from their graves – literally exiting through the gate (*men*) at the front of each burial mound – and subsequently to enter farmhouses in Dragon-head through their (newly decorated) gates and front doors. This is in order to be reunited (*tuanyuan*) with their descendants for ‘the turning of the year’. A new year’s eve meal of dumplings (*jiaozi*), which is eaten *after* the grave-side offerings have been made, is said to be shared with the newly-arrived ancestors, i.e. as a way of ‘greeting the spirits of the dead’, *jiaying guihun*. In many homes – although not in Old Yang’s – a brightly decorated lineage chart (*jiapu* or *zongpu*), a listing of the names of the dead which is usually kept discretely rolled up and placed out of the way, will be unrolled at this point and placed upon the wall as a physical manifestation of the fact that the ancestors have arrived. In front of this chart – an object which is said to be ‘invited’ (*qing*) into a home rather than ‘bought’ (*mai*) – offerings are made and the ancestors worshipped (*gong lao zu gong*) for the duration of their stay.

But why, one might ask, must these Chinese ancestors *arrive*? Why not simply say that they exist, that they are always there? As I have already suggested, this derives in part from a certain way of conceptualising relationships. Relationships with ancestors, as with other spirits and also with the living, are importantly *realised* through the process of greeting and sending off, in spite of the fact that in some ways the continuous presence of the ancestors is *also* acknowledged. To not have separations and reunions, from this perspective, is to not have a relationship. By this, however, I do not mean that the point of these practices is necessarily to build a closer

relationship with the ancestors. In fact, as I will later discuss, Chinese ancestral cults seem at times to simultaneously embrace *and* push away the dead. During traditional Chinese funerals, for example, steps are taken which clearly represent a cutting off, an ending of relationships with the deceased. This may be seen as necessary because of the dangers which ancestors potentially represent to their own families (cf. Thompson 1988). But the ancestors do nevertheless return, and they continue (in Dragon-head at least) to eat dumplings together with their descendants at midnight on each lunar new year's eve.

This reunion, in turn, ends with another separation in which the ancestors are noisily sent off – they are ‘seen on their way’ (*songhuiqu*) on the evening of the second day of the new year – again with firecrackers and dumplings. This is called *songnian*, literally ‘sending off the year’, here meaning the send-off which closes the beginning of a new year. On this occasion, offerings (of incense, food, wine, and spirit money) are generally made outside of the home in the courtyard. Members of the family bow to the ancestors (in generational order), after which the household head drops some of the food offerings onto the ground, and also pours out some wine. Each separation of this kind creates the possibility of a reunion, and each reunion creates the possibility of a separation – one which is, in some ways, desirable, because one would not want to live, throughout the year, with the immediate presence of the ancestors. The three pivotal days of the ‘turning of the year’ are framed by the ancestral greeting (*jie*) on new year's eve, and their subsequent sending off (*song*) on the second day of the first lunar month. But soon afterwards, on the fifteenth day of the first month, the ancestors return once again (for the ‘lantern festival’), and share another meal of dumplings with their descendants.

In Angang, the simultaneous presence and absence of the ancestors is more clearly seen. There, they are physically represented throughout the year on almost every domestic altar by wooden ancestral tablets (at which regular, usually daily, offerings are made). And in most homes the dead of more recent generations are also represented by sombre ‘ancestral-style’ photographs or drawings which are very prominently displayed in sitting rooms throughout the year. Nevertheless, they do also ‘return’ for the new year reunion, and they are ‘sent off’ following its conclusion. Special offerings mark their presence during this time, and these are often ‘personalised’ with the favourite foods, drinks, or cigarettes of the deceased being placed in front of their tablets.

4 *The reunion of the immediate family (tuanyuan)*

Earlier I cited Feuchtwang's observation that *chuxi*, new year's eve, is a time of home-coming, and a celebration of 'the continuing narrative of a complete household' (1992: 25). Indeed, by the time *chuxi* arrives in Dragon-head, and across China, many of the people who have moved away from home, for example to work or study in other places, will have *already* returned for the holidays. As more or less the entire nation prepares to celebrate, and to come to an effective halt for several weeks, trains and buses, crowded at the best of times, are literally crammed-full of people returning home, and it is nearly impossible for those without some form of useful 'connection' to purchase tickets. Television broadcasts praise the heroism of vacationless railway workers, and focus on the remarkable transportation crush caused by the festival. People are quite simply determined to get home, and in the countryside entire families bearing large parcels of food and gifts go past, perilously balanced on one bicycle or motor-bike, or on the back of a mule-driven cart, on the way to their moments of reunion.

Going home (*huijia*), and being home, for the 'passing of the year' is not simply thought of as a pleasurable or a desirable thing (although it is often both of these things as well). The new year's reunion is something which almost certainly *should* happen, and which only exceptionally does not. As Cohen has put it with reference to Taiwan, 'Everyone is expected to be with his [family] on the lunar new year's first day; eating elsewhere or entertaining a [non-family] member verges on the socially unacceptable' (1976: 113). This helps explain the rush to get home for an annual moment of reunion which, as Cohen's comment makes clear, is as much an exclusion of outsiders as a delineation of insiders. The undivided 'patrilineal family' – variously, and sometimes in fact rather flexibly defined – closes in upon itself, a gathering together in a circle, and those without families to return to may be distinctly isolated.

Note that in addition to the moral obligation to attend the moment of ancestral *reunion* on new year's eve, there is often a specific prohibition against *separation* on that night, just as Yang's sons were prohibited from leaving their home before midnight. In almost all families, children are similarly instructed not to leave the house, and/or are made to stay up late into the night in order to protect their parent's longevity. During the evening, the family must spend their time together, relaxing and playing (*wanr*), and these days often watching special new year's eve television programmes. Of course, many, if not all, of the people in the family which gathers around a particular new year's eve meal may not have been away at all. But the word used to describe such events strongly suggests a 'gathering

together', a reunion, of the family. *Tuanyuan* may mean both 'union' or 'reunion', and consists of two different characters which mean 'round' or 'spherical' (*tuan* by itself may be used as a verb meaning 'to roll something into a ball'). The meal on *chuxi* is specifically referred to as a *tuanyuan fan*, i.e. a '[family] reunion meal'. In any case – and regardless of who has and has not been away – this reunion circle also involves the dead (see above), who are certainly thought to have returned (*huilai*) for the event. Those who have moved away, along with those who have died, i.e. the ancestors, must come back to be reunited, and momentarily stay united, with those still living in the family home.

During this reunion, the hierarchy of generations must also be acknowledged, and although this sometimes happens in a rather perfunctory way, the rite of acknowledgement is arguably the high point of the entire festival. Just as the head of the household should bow to the ancestors and make offerings to them, children and grandchildren should respectfully bow to their parents and grandparents. Following this show of respect, elders usually give children and grandchildren gifts of money, known as *yasuiqian* (literally, 'press-the-year money'). (Throughout the new year period, in an echo of this, children receive gifts of *yasuiqian* from other adults in the community and also sometimes from outside visitors.) The familial rites and exchanges make clear, among other things, the *practical* inter-dependence of the ancestors, adults, and children. Just as the ancestors rely on the practical support of living adults, (for offerings which keep them 'comfortable'), children rely on the support and nurturance (*yang*) of adults (from whom they receive housing, food and money). But adults will *also* eventually rely on the practical support of their children. The giving to children of *yasuiqian* – a strange echo of the respectful offerings to ancestors and gods of money in return for future blessings and protection – arguably reflects this fact.

In Angang, and in all of Taiwan, the pre-new year period is also characterised by the rush to return home, and once this is achieved families effectively close in upon themselves (excluding outsiders) for the new year's eve meal. On the night of *chuxi*, children are prohibited from leaving the home and must stay awake in order to protect the longevity of their parents. A meal is eaten which symbolises unity and prosperity; this meal now often includes a 'hot pot' (which involves communal eating out of one bowl). Fish is normally also served because the word *yu*, 'fish', sounds like 'abundance', and to eat this food every year means 'year after year of abundance' (*niannian youyu*). During the evening, the hierarchy of generations is acknowledged, with juniors respectfully bowing in front of seniors in a display of *xiao*,

filial obedience, and with seniors bestowing gifts of *yasuiqian* – here more often known simply as *hongbao* (red envelopes) – on children. As I have discussed elsewhere, a *hongbao* is also a ‘bribe’, and these gifts to children in Angang may partly be seen (as in Dragon-head) as a way of ensuring future support for parents in their old age, something upon which they are often entirely dependent:

Xiao, filial obedience, is conventionally portrayed as a hierarchical relationship in which the child is controlled by the parents. But at the centre of the lunar new year, representative in many ways of this hierarchy, we find a transfer of money which arguably evokes the opposite: the power children have over their parents (Stafford 1995: 85).

In short, the new year reunion evokes both hierarchy and reciprocity; and just as it reveals the subordination of descendants to ancestors, and children to parents, it also reveals the dependence of ancestors on descendants, and of parents on children.

## 5 *Stringing together doors: new year visits*

Then, on the first day of the first lunar month, visits between different combinations of relatives, friends, neighbours, and colleagues begin. The meals on the first and second days of the new year are normally shared with close patrilineal relatives. On the second day, the ancestors are sent off. On the third day, married women normally return, along with their husbands and children, for a reunion with their parents at their natal homes, a visit known as *hui niangjia* (‘returning to mother’s home’). I mentioned that funerals are not a permanent separation of the dead from their families, in spite of the symbolism of separation found in funerals. Similarly, as I will later discuss, Chinese weddings symbolise the separation of a woman from her natal home; but the separation brought by marriage is, again, only one in a cycle. In fact, a bride returns home almost immediately after marriage, i.e. within a few days, for a reunion which is called *huimenr*, literally ‘returning to the door’, and every year thereafter she returns home for a meal during the lunar new year festival. Note, however, that these return visits, rather like the return of the ancestors, are arguably somewhat problematic. By stressing the ongoing tie of a woman to her natal home, the visits also highlight her position as an *outsider* in her husband’s family. But on these occasions the affinal tie is usually warmly celebrated, as are all of the ties celebrated during the reunion meals of the post-new year period.

As I’ve said, these visits (during which eating, drinking, and ‘playing’ [*wanr*] are usually the central preoccupations) are sometimes referred to as *bainian*, meaning to ‘give new year’s greetings’. The word *bai* also means ‘to

pay respect' – to worship deities is to *bai* them – and there is an idea that *bainian* visits are made to pay respect to one's superiors. This partly explains the crush of visitors at Old Yang's house during the festival; his status as a cadre made people want to pay their respects. But in Dragon-head the post-new year visits are more typically referred to as *chuanmenr*, literally to 'link up' or 'string together' doors. The word *chuan* means to get things mixed together, for example to cross telephone lines, and the character itself resembles two objects pierced on a skewer. It is also significant, as I will later discuss, that the word *men*, 'door', is one of the terms for 'family' – so the expression *chuanmenr* also means 'to string together families'. (Similarly, a woman's 'return to the door' after marriage, *huimenr*, is a return to her family.)

During the reciprocal new year visits, as I have described, gifts are left behind – always in 'auspicious' (*jixiang*) combinations of four or eight. In Dragon-head (and this differs in some respects from Yan Yunxiang's comprehensive account (1996) of gift-giving in Shandong province) if the guest is a neighbour, little or nothing will be said about the gifts, and they will simply be put away. A few days later the neighbour will receive a return visit, and be given comparable gifts. However, if the visitor is from far away, a return visit may be difficult or impossible. In this case gifts might be given in return immediately, although this is usually handled in a rather indirect way. On departure, the guest might be handed a bag (more often than not containing local produce, e.g. duck's eggs or fruit), and told 'Here's something for your mother back at home', implying that the gift is not *really* intended for the visitor himself. But ideally, and often in practice, each visit will produce more visits, and each banquet will produce more banquets.

Here I will briefly mention one example of banquet and counter-banquet: a series of meals participated in by the families of seven sisters as an elaborate form of *hui nianjia* (i.e. 'returning to the natal home'). The sisters had all married and moved away to live virilocally, i.e. with the families of their husbands, and their parents had also subsequently died. But every new year the sisters reunited to share a series of meals which were held at their marital homes. The head table at these meals was, in fact, reserved for the *husbands* of the sisters, rather than for the sisters themselves, who ate with their children and grand-children at tables set off to the side. The women would usually finish their meals rather quickly and turn to games of cards or *majiang*. Meanwhile, the meal at the men's table would go on for hours, as the brothers-in-law engaged in the complicated behaviour expected of adult men during formal and semi-formal banquets. They drank equal quantities of the same kind of alcohol (rice wine and/or beer), from glasses of the same size, lest the 'meaning' of the drinking be lost – as they

would noisily protest if anyone tried to shirk his responsibility. They teased each other roughly, but at times also dispensed stereotypically high-blown praise, and made long-winded (*luosuo*) speeches. Some of the meals were the occasion for serious, and sometimes rather direct, discussion of conflicts and problems from the past.

Meals of this semi-formal kind – a great many of which are held during the ‘stringing together of doors’ – are often notably prolonged, and there is an explicit recognition of the bittersweet nature of such events, i.e. a recognition that they cannot go on forever. As the saying has it, ‘There is no banquet, under Heaven, which does not come to an end.’ And when the end does, inevitably, come, the sadness of the moment is tempered by negotiating the next reunion in advance. As the meal draws to a close, someone will usually make a rather sombre statement of the unity of those sharing it (e.g. of the seven brothers-in-law). It will be said that in the future, if one of them encounters difficulties (*kunan*) of any kind, he will surely be able to count on the support of all the others. Then someone will invite the group to come to his house for a meal, apologising in advance for the fact that the food will probably not be very good or very plentiful, and the cycle will resume on another day. But any one cycle – such as that involving the husbands of the seven sisters – will overlap with other cycles, and many people in fact spend the entire new year festival period almost literally racing from one banquet table to another. To repeat, for many people this is the most notable activity of the lunar new year.

In Angang, the post-new year period is also heavily dominated by *bainian*, the cycle of visits between relatives, neighbours and friends. Brothers and patrilineal relatives join together for meals, women return to their natal homes, and the expanding cycles of reunion banquets (and of gambling circles) encompass the entire community, along with many who live outside. I was told that at this time of year people are really *obliged* to accept the invitations they would normally brush off in the course of the year, and as a result the pressure to eat and drink throughout the festival is very intense. In fact, when I became ill, at one point, from over-drinking, I was told not only that I must continue to accept all invitations to eat and drink, but that I must also drink *enough* for it to have a significant ‘meaning’ (*yisi*).

## 6 *The conclusion of the festival*

For some families in Dragon-head – as in Angang – things return to relative calm soon after the ‘turning of the year’, i.e. several days into the

new year when many visitors must depart, and many resume working. But the 'stringing together of doors' still carries on in most rural communities for some days, and it is only with the 'lantern festival' (*yuanxiaojie*) on the fifteenth (which coincides with the full moon) that the 'turning of the year' has truly, for most people, come to its end. Note however, that this apparent ending to the festival is marked by reunion: people gather together to eat with their ancestors, guided home by lanterns, before once again sending them on their way. In sum, the new year festival is a period of intense consumption and exchange, an annual reaffirmation of relationships between people, an expanding echo of the family reunion meal held with the ancestors on the pivotal night of *chuxi*, new year's eve. People say this time of year should be hectic, filled with activity and fun. More specifically, as one woman told me: 'It's good to have plenty of people. The more people there are, the better; the 'hotter and noisier' it is, the better!' (*Ren duo hao – yue duo yue hao, yue renao yue hao!*) While the intense togetherness of the lunar new year festival is perhaps not very desirable as a mode of everyday life, it is precisely what is *imagined* during the festival to be the ideal form of existence.

If one were to count the number of separations and reunions taking place in communities like Dragon-head and Angang during the new year festival – and especially if one counted the simple 'greetings' and 'farewells' which take place between people bumping into each other on the street – there would be a great many of them, so many (and often so drunkenly attended to) that they would present themselves as something of a blur. But three points should be made about this. First, the separations and reunions which take place during the new year are for the most part *not* random, but on the contrary are highly structured and central to the ideological concerns of the festival as a whole. Second, this coherent structure of separations and reunions is 'historical', i.e. it situates people in relation to the historical narratives of particular communities (including relatives to whom one *must* return). And, third, although the new year is an occasion during which such separations and reunions take place with special intensity, it should be recognised that they also happen with considerable frequency – indeed non-stop – throughout the rest of the year. In a later chapter, I will discuss more fully the experience of the new year festival in relation to Chinese historical consciousness. There I will suggest that the festival is one part of a complex learning environment in which children (and others) develop a sense of themselves as historical agents, i.e. as persons in the flow of familial/historical time. But I want to conclude this chapter by showing how the flow of such historical narratives – which seem to imply the *inevitability* of reunion – may be disrupted by histories of other kinds.



### The mid-autumn festival in a 'civilised work-unit'

The 'mid-autumn festival' (*zhongqiu jie*) on the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month is another extremely popular occasion – albeit much simpler than the new year – when reunion is an important theme and an expected occurrence in China. In the ideal scenario for this harvest festival, the 'complete' family should gather together in the evening in its own courtyard (i.e. surrounded by the arms of the family home), in order to enjoy, in a moment of unity, and weather permitting, the full autumn moon. Adding to the symbolism of 'completeness', they should eat round 'mooncakes' (*yuebing*) which 'represent coming together' (*daibiao tuanjie*). Although reunions on *zhongqiu jie* are not felt to be as compulsory as those during the new year, the festival is almost universally celebrated, and people do generally try to be with their families when it arrives. Here I want to discuss, however, one case in which a state institution effectively prevented many such reunions from occurring, and co-opted, at least partially, the symbolism of the festival. Hopefully my brief account of what occurred will dispel any notion of 'timeless' Chinese traditions of separation and reunion.

The institution to which I refer is an educational 'work-unit' (*danwei*), a teacher-training college (*shizhuan*) located in a market-town outside of a small city. Most of the students there come from the north China countryside – i.e. from villages like Dragon-head – and most can expect eventually to be posted back to rural areas. While at college, these students lead a highly structured existence, and it is widely assumed (both by students and staff) that such regimentation is particularly suitable for the training of teachers. Here, in the week before the mid-autumn festival, the only obvious festival-related activity consisted of people buying, both in the market-town and the nearby city, moon-cakes (*yuebing*) which they then ate and circulated amongst themselves in large quantities. It transpired that the college had organised its own mid-autumn festivities, and these were planned to coincide with celebrations of Teacher's Day (*laoshijie*). The students, many of whom lived close enough to home to easily spend the holiday there, might well have wished to do so; and they were, in fact, free to ask for leave (*qingjia*). But I was told that under the circumstances they 'wouldn't dare to' (*bugan*) because it would not look good, and in the event it appeared that almost all of them spent the mid-autumn festival participating in activities organised by the college.

These activities made for a rather fascinating combination. The day started with an early-morning assembly, in which a series of speeches praising education and current Communist Party leaders was made, between which prizes were distributed to teachers and to senior academics (almost all of whom were wearing, even at this late date, Mao suits). This ceremonial was followed, to my amazement, by the showing of a dubbed

version of 'The Professional', starring Jean-Claude Belmondo. Then came an enormous luncheon banquet in the college's dining hall (where normally only very meagre food was on offer). As the students ate off to the side, the teachers gathered around round tables to share a meal which was exceptionally grand by college standards, and which included chicken, prawns, sausages, mountain greens, and steamed rice buns. They drank beer and rice wine, and went from table to table to *pengbei*, 'clink glasses'. As the banquet started to get rowdy, the teacher next to me pointed out, with considerable irony, that such affairs are 'not scientific' (*bu kexue*) because of the waste involved. The meal was followed in the afternoon by parties, held in each department of the college, which centred on very long variety 'programmes' (*jiemu*).

But the grand collective event took place in the evening. Staff and students – over 1000 people – gathered outside in an enormous circle on the college's playing fields to watch yet another long programme of entertainments, ranging from ballroom dancing, to karaoke singing, to gymnastics. From the fields they could, in traditional fashion, admire the moon, and at the centre of everything was a great bonfire. After some hours of entertainments, i.e. at the end of the programme, the students formed large human chains around this bonfire. To the accompaniment of loudly amplified disco music, and I think to the dismay of college officials (who soon tried to calm things down), they began to race in increasingly wild circles around the flame. Their chains broke up, they rejoined hands, and the atmosphere was decidedly tense and electric (the contrast with the everyday demeanor of the teacher-trainees could not have been more extreme). Finally the music was stopped, the party ended abruptly, and in the darkness the somewhat over-excited students dutifully carried chairs from the playing fields back up into their classrooms.

In closing this chapter, I give this account of a relatively minor event for two reasons. First, and most obviously, because it is one example of a state institution intervening in a 'traditional' festival of reunion and, if nothing else, keeping its charges (the students) from returning home for it. But second, because it shows how very complex such an intervention is in practice. Within the work-unit itself, celebrations of the mid-autumn festival clearly borrowed from traditional observances: people ate 'moon-cakes', and they gathered together outside in the evening to enjoy the moon – although not, of course, with their own families. As I noted, the mid-autumn celebrations were also here rather untraditionally merged with events marking Teacher's Day, including a banquet during which standard Chinese notions of commensality were invoked. Bear in mind, however, that the celebration of education, and of the achievements of teachers, itself has a complex and changing history in revolutionary China. Many of the

teachers enjoying the Teacher's Day banquet, and the college's ersatz mid-autumn celebrations, had spent years in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution – the height of Chinese anti-traditionalism – because of their dubious profession. Now their own students will enter this profession at a time when it is officially praised and yet often openly scorned by the public (because teachers are so badly paid).

For students in the college, often away from home for the first time, and sometimes genuinely suffering for this separation, friendship takes on a great importance. (As I will discuss in the next chapter, the idioms of separation and reunion are also 'traditionally' crucial to the constitution of Chinese friendship and comradeship.) And when the college intervenes in the mid-autumn festival, and family reunions are replaced with collegial events, this produces precisely a gathering together of friends (something which can take on a momentum of its own). This gathering together – part of a newly realised mid-autumn festival of reunion – may thus be linked, in complex ways, to the history in modern China and Taiwan of the relationship between families and the state, via the medium of schooling. In short, it can be seen as a minor (if very complicated) example of the explicit and long-standing attempt by Chinese nationalists to replace kinship solidarity with comradeship and citizenship – often with unexpected results (Stafford 1992, 1995).

And I should stress that *all* the 'traditional' festive practices of separation and reunion which I have so far discussed, and which I will later discuss, should similarly be seen in the context of modern history. It is important to recognise that neither Angang nor Dragon-head (nor indeed any Chinese or Taiwanese locality) has been cut off from the transformations which are reformulating the parameters of the Chinese separation constraint. These transformations include very diverse phenomena: the growth of Chinese investment networks (which have fuelled international migration, but which have also sometimes brought 'sojourners' right back to their 'native places'); the dramatic post-war improvement in economic performance (which has, for example, made elaborate festival celebrations affordable for many in the Taiwanese, and more recently Chinese, countryside); the increase in women's mobility (a process which sometimes enables daughters, long before marriage, to separate from their natal homes); and the engagement of many 'dispersed' Chinese communities – arguably including those in Taiwan – in defining for themselves new forms of Chinese, and sometimes even non-Chinese, cultural identity (cf. Tu 1994). As I said at the beginning of this chapter: reunions may well be desirable – and calendrical festivals repeatedly underline their desirability – but history has a way (a very complicated way) of interfering with them.